'Danzanravjaa is my hero!': the transformation of

This is quite possibly the first literary critical paper to be written in English on contemporary Mongolian poetry.[1] As such, it would seem fitting that the title used here repeats the words of the poet Ayurzana. That he, a member of Ulaanbaatar's young, cool intelligentsia, should see the 19th century poet-monk Danzanravjaa as his hero provides us with a powerful socio-cultural platform from which to observe how these young poets work in a modern idiom while remaining aware of their Mongolian heritage.

Simon Wickham-Smith

I have written here previously on the life and work of the 5th Noyon Khutugt Danzanravjaa.[2] Danzanravjaa's education provided him with a vast corpus of religious and literary material from which he could draw, and it is the use he made of this tradition which characterises his poetic output. Structurally, his technique makes frequent use of the head-and-tail form, in which each line of a stanza begins with the same letter and ends with the same word. What is contextually most interesting here is that this is clearly a technique based upon orality: repetition through the stanzas serves as an *aide memoire*. Over time, however, the metalinguistic aspects of orthographic and aural structure have been subsumed into the form of the genre and the genre itself has become integral to the literature.[3]

In terms of subject matter, too, Danzanravjaa begins from the traditional topoi of Mongolian poetry – nature, the seasons, the nomadic life – and interweaves them with practical advice based on Buddhist wisdom to produce what in many ways is a radical and unusual corpus. In fact, it was precisely the accessibility of his lyric to the nomadic stock from which he came that so set him apart from the religious establishment.

Perhaps, then, it is a striking conceit to frame Danzanravjaa as the precursor to the work of today's young Mongolian poets. But he is just a frame. The new voices of Mongolian poetry live in a society where national pride and tradition are being deliberately focussed on the future and out into the wider world. Young poets are discovering a way to combine the Mongolian poetic tradition with a Western sensibility and are thus creating what might tentatively be designated a new strand of world literature.

The nomadic life: dreams and visions

A cursory glance through the pages of Mongolian poetry[4] will reveal that, as is the case with Mongolian culture as a whole, the experience of dreams and visions is central to the poetic aesthetic. Indeed, the repetition founded in orality is a kind of enchantment, the creation of a dream state through alliteration and echo.

In fact, it is more a memory than a dream, but a memory caught in the clasp of melancholy, which characterises much of this poetry. Take, for instance, Ölziitögs's poem *In your absence*. For me, the overwhelming loss expressed in this poem is a temporary loss, and this emphasises the feeling that her lover (presumably) is going to return. But this is a poem about vision, and Ölziitögs's vision holds a powerful image to which she can open only in the darkness: 'In the dark, in the dark alone, you appear / Where the whole world, time and existence, grow dim'. This is more than simply a vision in her mind of her lover's image; it is a revelation of a love which is found in the world beyond the senses.

Ayurzana, who has claimed, *Danzanravjaa is my hero!*, deals with a similar theme in his poem 'Standing in the silence of night'. It is interesting to compare the work of these two poets, as the ideas within their poems seem to relate closely to one another. The relation between the work of Ayurzana and Ölziitögs is further enhanced by the information that they are married to each other. Whilst I do not want to presume any creative similarity from this information, it would seem pointless to ignore the obvious emotional input given the nature of both of their poetries. Here, for instance, we have another poem concerned with the physical senses – of smell rather than vision – but Ayurzana's approach is more narrative. His narrative, in fact, seems to range from a kind of wakeful dream (in which he is caught unawares by a presence, a scent) through memory (again catalysed by scent – 'A rose garden nearby, and / I fell into the past') to a feeling of disassociation in the final verse that, in some ways, resolves the poem into an eternal mystery.

What strikes me in particular when comparing the work of these two poets is the ways in which they address the physical world. Nature and our relationship with it have been central to Mongolian poetry for centuries: for instance, this relationship is one of Danzanravjaa's principal themes and the medium

G-A AYURZANA (1970)

Standing in the silence of night, my mind stupefied,
Who was it flashed across my dulled sight?
This vision was as incense through the darkness,
A path of sadness hanging in the air.

I stumbled along a lighted path,
Seeking what remained in my memory.
A rose garden nearby, and
I fell into the past.

And suddenly I returned.

That perfume!
I'd fallen for it utterly, had picked it, breathed it in.
O, what flower was it?

Was this truly someone's love
Floating around me? Or a shooting star?
Or else, in the silence of night,
Was it a shining visage floating past?

There, a thousand suns burning in my heart,
The words of the Buddhas in the infinite sky
Flew like a crane, leading the flock into spring.

Some suns fade from existence.
Some words vanish from the world.
And some tumble into my eyes as snow,
And strike the earth.

Anemones, shocked into life by the melting earth,
Have gripped my mind.
I sensed their new buds, autumn's evening
Perfume, from a thousand years away.

the sound of rain falling on the felt roof
the sound of rain striking the felt roof
the sound of sound striking the felt roof
...repeating without repeating...

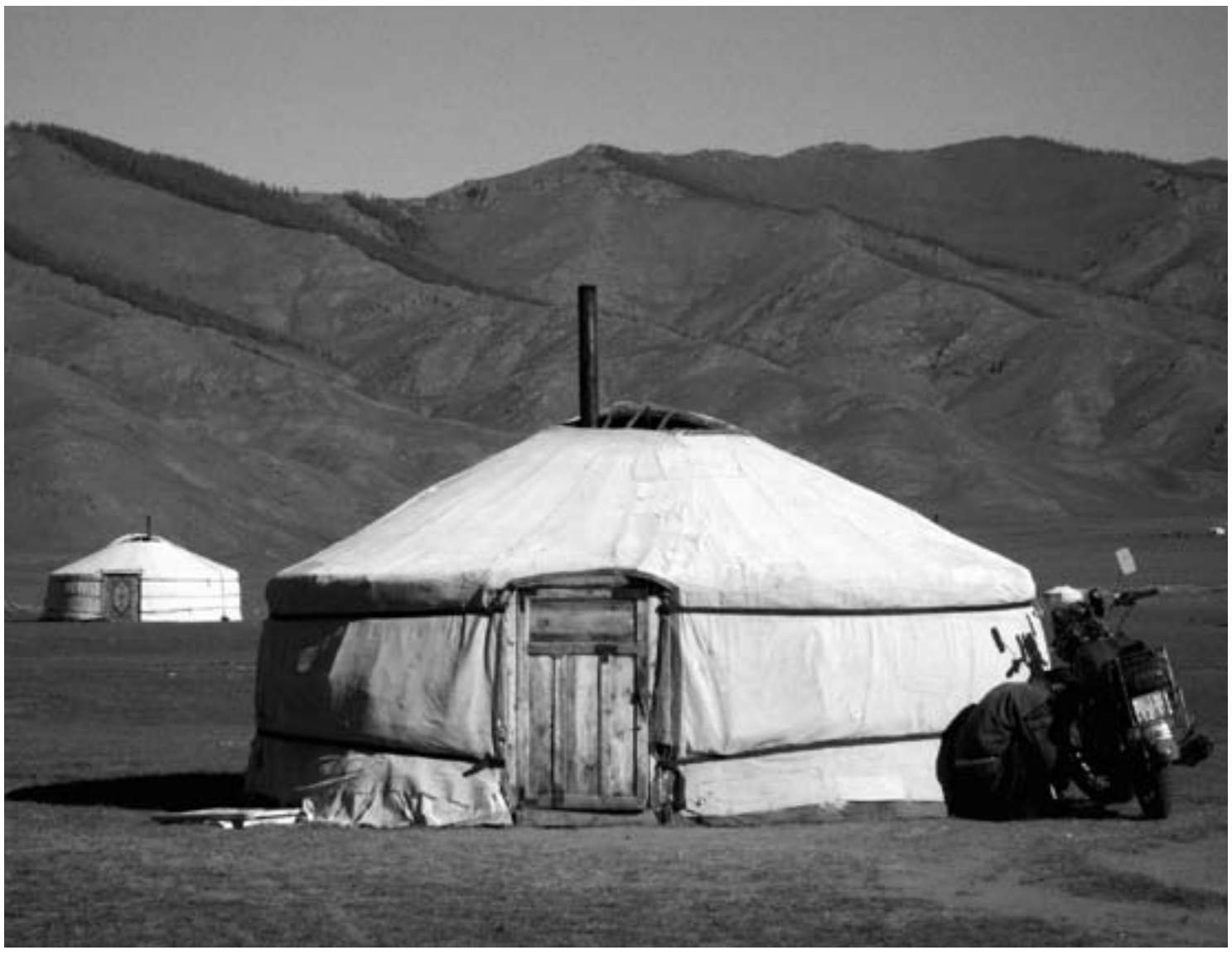
the sound of rain falling on the felt roof
the sound of rain striking the felt roof
the sound of sound striking the felt roof
...repeating without repeating...

(translated by Simon Wickham-Smith)

TS BAVUUDORJ (1971)

A VERY BIG, WHITE ELEPHANT

A very big, white elephant
Has passed through the world.
He's left with the calmness
Of the mighty ocean.
He's left, uprooting
The serenity of the earth.
He's left, shaking
Dew from the topmost leaves.
He's returned, disturbing the sun gods.
He's left, commandeering
Golden temples, shining with blood.
He's left, waking
Grey peaks under snow.
He's left, shutting the eyes of the mighty.
He's returned, shaking East and West.
A very big, white elephant
Has passed through the world.
A very big, white elephant...



tradition in contemporary Mongolian poetry

through which he frequently chooses to express his understanding of Buddhist teachings. But the turning of the seasons is so commonplace a focus for both contemporary and premodern literature that it would be extraordinary not to find it in the works of even the youngest and most urban(e) of writers.

So whereas Ayurzana chooses to express nature through a dream of concrete (or at least explicit) images (the silence of night, a lighted track, a rose garden) and evokes scent, that most fragile of senses, to express his sudden emotion, Ölziitögs uses the visible solidity of phenomena (an apple, a hat, butterflies, a cloud) to express something that is absent from her and yet felt absolutely.

Accepting pain and sadness

The complex interweaving of images in and between these two poems can be extrapolated to the work of other poets. The signature poem of Enkhboldbaatar, one of the founders of the poetry collective UB Boys,[5] expresses a sense of desperation and confinement relative to the feelings evoked by Ayurzana and Ölziitögs. 'I sit in a darkened room', Enkhboldbaatar writes in his poem *The Set (Absolute Values)* extending the idea of confinement into another of the standard themes of Mongolian literature, the idea of facing the world, with all its difficulties, in a direct and self-aware way. Of course, this theme is also central to Buddhist literature, but there is perhaps a harsher – or at least a stronger – tendency in Mongolian literature (and arguably in Mongolian society as a whole) to accept pain and sadness, which can be seen in part as a manifestation of Danzanravjaa's influence. For Danzanravjaa was scathing in his criticism of people who refused to acknowledge the truth that was right in front of them, with all its problems and cruelties: when we look at Enkhboldbaatar's poem, then, we should take into account not only his personal experience but also the historical feeling expressed by poets such as Danzanravjaa.[6]

The stifling quality of this poem closes around us even as we read; we are forced to feel the poet's misery and futility. The one outside reference, to the moon, 'Like a woman's eyes, gazing', is so dulled and non-committal that its almost total lack of effect is startling. And, later, when the moon reappears, the effect is again to plunge the poet more deeply into his grief, a kind of lunacy or night madness in which emotions are heightened and desperation is made more profound.

How interesting, too, that the poet 'feel[s] freedom in the darkness'. But this darkness is a natural darkness and, finally, he exchanges this reassuring darkness for the personal inner darkness of 'my grief and sadness...' The ellipsis here, more frequently used in Mongolian poetry than perhaps in Western poetries, seems to me to emphasise the poet's understanding of his own futile and pointless life.

These three poets discuss the relationship between the inner and outer worlds, their inner and outer lives. This is of course not an aspect exclusive to Mongolian poetry, but I would argue that the deep sense of feeling for, and direct relationship to, nature is characteristic of Mongolian literature, at least from the earliest written sources. The nomadic instinct that informs Central Asian literature as a whole brings to the fore not only the earth and its creatures beneath, but also the heavens and the stars above; the entire cosmos takes on a central role.

External influences: haiku and the Buddha

The literature of neighbouring cultures has been a constant influence on Mongolian poetry. I have already mentioned the nomadic literatures of Central Asia, but of course the Buddhist poetry of Tibet and China has also exercised a powerful effect. Although Danzanravjaa never actually visited Tibet, the general monastic and specific Buddhist education that he received shows throughout his oeuvre: there are direct references to the poems of the 6th Dalai Lama, with whom he is often compared, and also less obvious references to the *glu* and *gzhas* traditions of both secular and religious Tibetan poetry.[7]

But in the contemporary world, Mongolian poetry has been influenced by cultures further abroad. Erdenetsogt's *Mongolian Haiku* series uses the traditional Japanese form in a loose way: rather than presenting an image followed by a short concluding idea (in the sense preferred by Basho), Erdenetsogt often presents a single image over the three lines. So these are not haiku per se, but rather an adapted form, namely, Mongolian haiku: this recalls the way in which the premodern traditions of nature poetry and Buddhist poetry have been given a more modern voice.

As with traditional Japanese haiku, Erdenetsogt's Mongolian haiku evoke nature: the examples printed here are representative of the entire collection, with references to flowers, the

SORROW

I have come crawling to you,
Through arrogance and sudden drops in temperature,
Through the colours of the world and
Through the suppression of dreams.
I want to love you
With the kind of sweet affection
That can dwell only in a human being.
In my heart I mourn one thing,
That I've not been able to love another.
I regret I'm not a swallow on the wild steppe,
That I cannot soar to meet another.
I want to love you, to
Open the eyes of cross-legged Buddhas.
I've such a magic storm –
I want to make a lily in the snow glance up.
I've such a shining wind...
I want to love you...but
In the hazy smile of this moment
I can't come close to you.
In this cold glow of arrogance,
I cannot come to you.
I wanted only to love you...

MUSIC

Times of loud noise inside the ger
Of the fire's smell...
The lion protects our heritage in the moonlight.
Father's dreams underfoot,
Mother's fingers on her rosary,
Only Buddha in their minds...
Their calm, clear eyes are heavy, their
Mantras flying,
An ornament of sound...

(translated by Simon Wickham-Smith)

L ÖLZIITÖGS (1972)

Looking at mountains, I feel I am a mountain.
Looking at mist and haze, I feel I am a cloud.
After the rain has fallen, I feel that I am grass, and
When sparrows start to sing, I remember I am morning.

I am not a human, that's for sure.

When stars flare up, I feel I am the darkness
When girls shed their clothes, I remember I am spring
When I smell the desire of everybody in this world,
I realise how my quiet heart is a fish's.

I am not a human, that's for sure.

Under the colourful sky, an immense EMPTINESS
Starting from today I am only...

A SECRET WHISPERED TO GOD

What do you like, God asked me in a whisper.
The sound of the church bells,
The lit candle melting down,
The snow, shining in the darkness,
And my Bombuulei's smile.

What don't you like, God asked me in a whisper.
The sound of the church bells,
The lit candle melting down,
The snow, shining in the darkness,
And my son's smile.

D ENKHBOLDBAATAR (1971)

A SET (ABSOLUTE VALUES)

.1,56,,.0O∞.E,E,0000T∞..,∞

point (not a new start),
one (this is the real start),
comma (links a numerical sequence),
fifty-six (not an age, not an order, not anything),
comma (this could be the end),
comma (but this one's a mistake),
another point (this delimits the values),
zero (the correct form) and, behind it,
the letter O (same shape, different meaning),
infinity (this is the continuation),
point (the limit of the endless infinite),
the letter E (this is the end),
comma (starting over), and again
the letter E (but this is where it starts),
comma (signal),
zero zero zero zero (four places),
the letter T (meaningless),
∞ (the most amazing [being other]),
point (geometrical), and again
point (literal),
comma (this is how it ends. It means...),
continuing (this indicates the beginning)...

I sit in a darkened room,
Thinking about this and that.
The dull moon peers in through the window,
Like a woman's eyes, gazing.
The clouds move awhile,
Plunging me into darkness.
My sight is far away now,
I feel freedom in the darkness.
From behind the clouds, the moon reappears.
Again, the room closes its walls around me.
I cannot see beyond the walls,
And close my eyes in desperation.
I leave behind the freedom of the dark,
And sit amid my grief and sadness...

... (EMPHATIKOS)

Live not in song but in tears, and
Don't be too frail when you're in love.
Be aware that you can barely see through rancour, and
In forgiveness, that all of us are sinned against by life.
No, no, our fate has always been
To be an ordinary and downtrodden servant.
We have looked up to the sun,
We have had no history up to now.
My right hand tightly envelopes my left,
My heart tortures my brain,
Else desire and trust will gnaw themselves,
And my dear body will be mutilated.
We may oppose the fury of our fate,
But its hook will trick us,
As the roe deer is struck down by the hunter's arrow,
And, helpless, collapses to its knees.
Oh yes, we are always slaves,
We are born into the hands of destiny,
And there we die. But we must fight and,
If we fight, then death will be acceptable.
So live not in song, but in tears,
Live to endure, to struggle, and to struggle once again,
Like a sword, like a sharp knife, and
Barely able to see through righteous anger.
But, at the end, one thing:
In this struggle, you will never be victorious.
You will never win. And that's because
There's nothing good in anything.

(translated by Simon Wickham-Smith)

seasons, horses, the moon... all these images are central to the Mongolian aesthetic sensibility and, taken together, the entire collection of poems present this traditional aesthetic in a modern form.

The principal structural difference within these poems is between a form more in keeping with the Japanese model ('mirages canter / along the mountain cliffs / the sun still burns untamed') and the single-image of Erdenetsogt's creation ('waterweeds, swimming / like fish in a pool / under a grass-green moon'). In my opinion, these haiku indicate one especially significant feature of contemporary poetry in Mongolia: the interest and enthusiasm of poets for experimentation with basic forms.

Buddha in a gulag of form

But while Erdenetsog's haiku exemplifies the general tendency among young poets toward experimentation with common forms, almost none of them attempt to radically experiment with form itself. This is probably owing to the interplay of aesthetic conservatism in Mongolian culture and the fear of novelty and boundary-breaking that characterised Soviet culture after its initial radicalisation during the 1920s. Thus there is no evidence of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry (a movement in experimental poetry), no abstraction, no fragmentation, no visual poetry.

I have been able to find only one poem, Enkhboldbaatar's 'A Set (Absolute Values)', that pushes in any way against the envelope of form. It is a simple, line-by-line exposition of a series of numbers, letters and symbols. What appears to be a random list has, however, been infiltrated by additional punctuation and irrelevant letters, and the feeling evoked as the description continues is one of hopeless surreality. Given the arrow that ends the sequence, which 'indicates the beginning', this hopeless surreality is set to continue ad nauseam.

In many ways, this abstract and apparently experimental poem repeats the feeling of the Enkhboldbaatar poem discussed above. Both poems emphasise a sense of futility, of spiralling misery, while conjuring (both literally and metaphorically) with ideas of freedom and darkness. We can possibly see a source of these feelings in the situation of Soviet and post-Soviet Mongolia: the apparent hopelessness of being confined within a dictatorship has given way to perhaps an equally hopeless democracy, where totalitarian control has been swapped for a nearly lawless free-for-all. But we can also see that other strong influence on Mongolian culture, Buddhism. For Buddhism offers personal freedom but appears also to deny the sensate world; it is frequently portrayed as a *via negativa*, so much so that to combine it with an upbringing under Soviet control might very likely give rise to feelings of desperation.

This combination is at work in Erdenetsog's poem 'Sketch' Neither the image seen, nor the melody heard, can be recorded, and the poet remains frustrated. But the disconnect here is metaphysical; it brings to mind the inability to remember an entirety, how Buddhism shows the fleeting quality of experience and, thereby, shows the poet the immediacy of his experience and thus of his mind. So the poem is also imbued with a feeling of acceptance, that this is how the world, the universe, is. This is in itself a realisation of wisdom, an acceptance of the nature of reality, and expresses the influence of Buddhism upon Mongolian culture.

Language over meaning: the sound of thoughts conveyed

However, we can no longer characterise Buddhist thought as inherent to the Mongolian psyche. Seventy years of MPRP domination reduced explicit Buddhist practice to a minimum, although domestic and international efforts are trying to revive it. A more coherent understanding of Buddhism's place in the contemporary literary scene can be found in the work of Bavuudorj. On a superficial level, there are copious references to Buddhism throughout his work; on a deeper level, however, it is the atmosphere created by his language in which Bavuudorj's approach to spirituality is revealed. This atmosphere relates perhaps to a kind of animated aesthetic, as though the 'real' world were somehow crossed with a cartoon. The imagery thus becomes somewhat distorted and simpler, though in places it is considerably more potent and vivid.

'A Very Big White Elephant', for instance, refers to the 'precious elephant', which represents the strength of an enlightened mind, one of the Buddha's seven royal attributes. So while this is a poem about a marauding elephant, it is also a poem about the nature of the enlightened mind. This particular approach to Buddhism might be seen as a kind of spiritual re-evaluation, even revolution. After all, this elephant has not only 'commandeer[ed] / Golden temples, shining with blood', he has also 'left, shutting the eyes of the mighty and returned, shaking East and West'. That this appears to be only a reference to the precious elephant, rather than a poem specifically about it, leaves the semiotic field open for individual interpretation, not unlike the fundamental openness of Buddhist practise.

On the spiritual level, then, 'A Very Big, White Elephant' is slightly unhinged, a dervish of a poem, where the poet's created world is more conducive to ecstasy than to contemplative calm. 'Music', on the other hand, is a quiet and diaphanous poem. Dwelling in the past, it is a conjuring of memory, of a family scene where harmony is effected through an upholding of tradition and Buddhist practice. In this way, we can see how Bavuudorj presents the traditional, *ger*-dwelling nomadic lifestyle within the context of a peaceful remembrance. There are commonalities here with other contemporary Mongolian poets, not least of them Mend-Oyoo, one of the most important voices of the generation prior to Bavuudorj's. But among these young poets, the language of vision and memory points backwards to the national cultural tradition and forwards to a new way of looking at the changing world of Mongolian society: neither wholly nomadic nor wholly urban, neither wholly Buddhist nor wholly atheist.

Contemporary Mongolian poetry has suffered from being reared during the cultural isolation of the Soviet era, but it is nonetheless a vibrant force among Central Asian poetries. The work of these five young writers not only addresses the common themes of nomadic literatures but also the Buddhist tradition with which Mongolians are now starting to reconnect. In this way, then, these poets are closely following the tradition of Danzanravjaa, expressing their ideas of love and separation, of spirituality, of the natural world in a straightforward manner and with direct language. Furthermore, the almost total lack of formal experimentation bespeaks an emphasis on content over form, which reflects the practical nature of a nomadic culture.

But at the root of these poems there remains the visionary, dreamlike quality, a thread stretching back through the history of Mongolian literature. This quality is frequently expressed more in the language than in the meaning; it is the way in which ideas are expressed, the sound of the thoughts conveyed. Sound in the original is all but lost in translation, for translation can only attempt to indicate the original. But if attempt is all we can do, then attempt we must, for translation is a tool that broadens audiences, gets poets heard, and thus encourages a deeper investigation of this literature, as much in Mongolia itself as in the West. <

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Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Elizabeth Myhr in helping me to organise my thoughts regarding the relationship between Mongolian and Western poetic forms

2 I have been unable to find any criticism, in fact, on any contemporary Mongolian literature in any Western language. I would be happy to hear from anyone who has information on previous studies.

3 Wickham-Smith, Simon. Spring 2006. 'The Way of the World'. *IIAS Newsletter* (40).

4 This is of course not only the case in Mongolian: it is noteworthy how many people still feel that poetry has to exhibit rhyme and rhythm in order to be poetry.

5 There is no space here to look beyond the confines of contemporary Mongolian poetry, but the anthologies mentioned in the bibliography, one compiled and translated by Charles Bawden and another by myself and Tsog Shagdarsüren, will provide the reader with sufficient comparative evidence.

6 This group was founded in 1989 by Enkhboldbaatar, Dashmunkh, and Nyam-Ochir and is at the forefront of the small but influential Ulaanbaatar literary scene. The group's English motto sums them and indeed all the poets discussed in this paper up perfectly: 'We are not new, but we don't want to be old'.

7 I should also mention here another strand of poetry prevalent in the 20th century, namely, the underground, anti-communist *samizdat* tradition. This had its own feeling of desperation and misery and humour but, again, is beyond the scope of this essay.

8 Glu and gzhas are short verses, used by both spiritual and secular poets, to express specific and immediate ideas, in a way quite similar to Japanese haiku. Generally consisting of two couplets, these styles were used by poets such as the 6th Dalai Lama, Drukpa Kunley, and Milarepa and exist in the present day in the form of repartee, work or political songs.

Simon Wickham-Smith, wickhamsmith@gmx.net
Translator of Mongolian and Tibetan literature

T ERDENETSOGT (1971)

Sketch

When I thought about the World
An unusual portrait revived
As I took my brush to paint it
Things were without shape...

When I thought about the Universe
A multi-coloured melody picked up
As I took my pen to write it down
Whispers were with no words and a colourless ink...

Verse upon an offering scarf

1.
A poet's verse,
Whispered to autumn birds, is the teaching of God,
is the song of coming back,
is the fate of being left behind.
A poet's song,
Offered to the winter moon, is a burning love,
is the wisdom of struggle,
is an echo from the mountains watching over us.
A poet's feelings,
Caressing a spring flower, the tears of beauty,
are an undimmed sadness.
are a credulous desire.
A poet's character,
Brimming over the summer skies, is a flash of stars,
is the sound of the universe,
is the garden of space.
A poet's verse,
Offered to humanity, is a song of freedom,
is the wind moving a pennant,
is a point to lean upon, a body to wear away.
A poet's words,
Famous throughout Mongolia, are the laws of the state,
are a decree of the state
are an oath to the state
2.
A poet is a glimmering of the universe.
A poet is a magnificent flash of light.
A poet is the whip of the sky.
A poet is the messenger of God.

From Mongolian haiku

I dreamed
a smile long gone
next to my pillow, the moon

mirages canter
along the mountain cliffs
the sun still burns untamed

waterweeds, swimming
like fish in a pool
under a grass-green moon

a string of birds
and clouds leave flowers
with eyes of tears

as spring days
long for rain,
my thoughts find no rest

In your absence

In my eyes there are butterflies, a felt hat, mirror and a candle.
In my eyes there are women, an apple, trees and a bird.
In my eyes there are clocks, a key, cloud and the sky.
In my eyes there is everything, except for you.

Even the wings of the butterfly and the nice felt hat cause me sadness.
Because you are not here, the sun is not yellow and the tree is not green.
If I can't see you and I can't hear you,
I don't need ears and eyes, I don't need anything.

In the dark, in the dark alone, you appear,
There, where the whole world, time and existence, grow dim.
I will close my eyes, therefore.
Oh, this burdening light, this burdening sun...